

DACA uncertainty in SCOTUS felt by community

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IDEAS, which stands for Improving Dreams, Equality, Access and Success, is an organization that pledged to provide students with resources and support no matter what the outcome of DACA is in the Supreme Court.

(Mia Speier | Daily Trojan)

Elle Fersan, director of the USC Immigrants and Global Migrations Initiative, is preparing materials to help students as the Supreme Court decides whether or not to allow President Donald Trump's cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. As the future of the program is being evaluated by the court, many undocumented students face uncertainty about their status in the country.

“We know this is coming,” Fersan said. “And we’re working to create legal pathways to mitigate this issue if DACA is rescinded. Obviously, we can’t do anything illegal, so we have to find creative ways to legally address the needs of our students.”

The IGMI is an initiative from the Office of the Provost and the Gould School of Law that advocates for undocumented individuals both on and off campus by holding events and conducting research.

Without DACA, which grants those illegally brought into the United States as children the chance to work and go to school legally, undocumented students would not be able to study in the country. The Trump Administration announced plans to challenge DACA in early 2017, but the Supreme Court did not hear oral arguments until Nov. 12. According to CNN, the majority-conservative court will likely rule to end the program.

Selena Castillo, a DACA recipient and a freshman majoring in international relations, said the recent hearing forced her to consider a future without the program.

“We live on a limbo,” Castillo said. “I’ve been thinking about all my plans for the possible outcomes ... trying to cope with this idea that we can lose that little bit of stability that we do have. It’s hard because we’re different, but we’re living a lifestyle as though we’re the same.”

If DACA is rescinded, undocumented members of the USC community may turn to programs available on campus. Improving Dreams, Equality, Access, and Success is an organization on campus dedicated to giving students a safe space to talk freely and connecting them to the resources they need. IDEAS, currently shares space with La CASA, and is pushing for a permanent space to provide continuous support for those affected should DACA be struck down.

“IDEAS started as a community of support,” said IDEAS executive director Valeria Resendiz, a senior majoring in non-governmental organizations and social change and political science. “[It was a] space where you could build community and feel safe with one another; develop professionally, develop socially.”

The group also partners with the Immigration Legal Assistance Center, which offers free consultations and covers the cost of DACA renewals for USC students. Vanessa Gomez Brake, associate dean of religious life, acts as a resource that undocumented students can turn to for counseling and assistance.

“[Citizenship status] is not something you talk about necessarily, just in passing,” Gomez Brake said. “So providing this safe space where they can come to me and talk to me about everything that’s going on, I then am able to point them in the right direction in terms of the resources they’re seeking.”

In the wake of the Supreme Court hearings, President Carol Folt recently tweeted her support of undocumented students who participate in the program.

"@USC continues to stand in solidarity with our #DACA recipients," she wrote. "Dreamers are an irreplaceable part of what makes our school, our city and our country such an amazing place."

Despite Folt's promise, some feel the University could do more to protect and support undocumented students. Their citizenship status makes it challenging for them to find jobs or internships while studying at USC.

The Undergraduate Student Government published a three-page scholarship resource guide for undocumented students, and the University has an eight-page resource guide to help guide undocumented students through financial aid and scholarship processes.

On top of the money available through the California Dream Act, which offers financial aid to qualifying undocumented students, the USC Financial Aid Office also provides additional assistance to some. Still, their citizenship status makes it largely impossible for these students to find jobs or internships while studying on campus.

"Right now, I'm a Norman Topping Scholar," Castillo said. "I've been a Bovard Scholar, Summer Bridge Scholar. So USC has given me a lot of money and resources."

However, Resendiz said that while resources exist, many remain unaware of what is available to them in the community.

"We do have community support; however, it's really decentralized, so students aren't really aware of this information," she said. "Sometimes it's not even publicized. You just have to know the right people to have access."

Resendiz said that USC should train its faculty and staff to better understand and accommodate the needs of undocumented students, especially now that DACA is in question. Gomez Brake is forced to fill two roles, serving as both a religious leader and point person for these students.

"As much as I enjoy the work, I think it would make a lot more sense if we had dedicated staff and a space for this particular need," Gomez Brake said.

Ferson promised that IGMI is going to do everything it can to improve the situation on campus. It will begin by assembling a comprehensive and easily accessible list of all the resources available to undocumented students.

"It's daunting for students to look for these resources," Ferson said. "But when they find them in one place, it will be much easier for them to navigate this huge structure."

